What to Eat at Moon Rabbit, Chef Kevin Tien’s New Venue for Vietnamese Fine Dining

The former Emilie’s and Himitsu chef is ready to open his new restaurant on the Southwest Waterfront

by Gabe Hiatt  |  Oct 29, 2020, 12:53pm EDT

For the past three weeks, Kevin Tien has been trying to fill a bowl of rice porridge with all the jigsaw pieces that put together his life’s story, but a fine dining recipe for congee has been tough to crack.

The buzz-collecting D.C. chef has been working overtime to develop a menu for Moon Rabbit, a modern Vietnamese restaurant that opens for dinner on the Southwest Waterfront on Saturday, October 31. When the management group at the InterContinental Hotel at the Wharf recruited Tien, they told him they wanted him to cook whatever felt personal. That approach had yielded a James Beard award for for the previous restaurant partner, chef Kwame Onwuachi, who gave Afro-Caribbean cuisines a rarefied treatment at Kith/Kin. The opportunity was perfectly timed for Tien, who left highly anticipated Emilie’s less than a year after opening the Asian-American communal dining spot. The fizzling of that project and a perspective Tien found during the COVID-19 pandemic was already forcing him to reflect on how he defined himself as a chef and why he knew so little about his Vietnamese family’s history.
Although Tien says he’s still tinkering with the right texture for the Carolina Gold rice in a bowl of cháo cua, the congee is an early example of where he’s arrived after digging into Vietnamese cookbooks, exploring dishes that were unfamiliar to him at mom-and-pop restaurants in Northern Virginia’s Eden Center, and reconnecting with his mother and his grandmother ahead of his recent wedding.

“We always had congee in the house,” Tien says. “Whenever you’re sick, you have congee. Whenever it’s cold, you have congee.”

The version on Moon Rabbit’s opening menu starts with a lobster and shrimp stock and folds in local crab, a common ingredient in the city where Tien has cooked for the past nine years. Halved pods of roasted okra and a dark roux sauce drizzled on top give the rice a touch of gumbo. The chef says he was the first member of his family born in the United States. He spent a formative chunk of his adolescence in Lafayette, Louisiana.

“Your family pushes you to be more American. It’s all about assimilation,” Tien says. “You try to be American. And then trying to be American growing up, I lost touch with my Vietnamese side. My family came over after the Vietnamese war, so they don’t want to talk about it much.”
Tien says his grandmother raised his mother in Ho Chi Minh City. Although his family was based closer to the coast, he’s using an inland recipe for a dipping sauce called muối ớt xanh sữa đặc — sweetened condensed milk loaded up with blitzed Thai green chiles — that’s served with grilled prawns dressed in garlic and Thai basil butter. He adds scallions to cut the heat, but the fiery condiment still reflects how his family likes to eat.

Moon Rabbit’s pastry chef has yet to arrive, so Tien had to come up with the restaurant’s first dessert himself. His bánh flan comes in a cup with a layer of condensed milk-based custard propping up a floater of coffee caramel syrup with chocolate pearls and flakes of salt.

Tien credits chef de cuisine Judy Beltrano, who he says shared sous chef duties with him when they were at Momofuku CCDC, with forming the idea for a spicy peanut romesco sauce meant to evoke bún bò huế (beef vermicelli soup) in a vegetarian dish built around charred Caraflax cabbage, pineapple, and herbs.
A super spicy condensed milk and chile sauce comes alongside prawns grilled in garlic and Thai basil butter at Moon Rabbit | Rey Lopez/Eater D.C.

Bánh flan with Vietnamese coffee caramel and chocolate pearls | Rey Lopez/Eater D.C.

Moon Rabbit’s cá lóc vong subs in roasted branzino for the traditional catfish in a turmeric curry sauce with dill oil, Tokyo turnips, and baby bok choy | Rey Lopez/Eater D.C.
While Vietnamese dishes are the through-line for the restaurant, Tien is still venturing into other cuisines in the same way that made the first kitchen he led, at former Eater D.C. Restaurant of the Year Himitsu, a hard-to-define hit.

The chef got his start serving sushi, and his crudos have always grabbed attention. Moon Rabbit offers a kombujiime scallop crudo that references a Japanese method of curing by pressing seafood between kombu, the umami-laden dried seaweed. Slices of scallop go in a cold coconut broth modeled after Thai tom kha soup with shiso leaf, pickled pearl onions, and crunchy chile sate sauce.

Chim cút chiến bot, a style of twice-fried quail seasoned in Chinese five spice at Vietnamese street stalls, is double-dredged and fried Louisiana-style with a five spice glaze at Moon Rabbit. The birds come with drop biscuits, red onions treated in the style of Peruvian salsa Criolla, and butter whipped with chiles Tien says he’s been fermenting since he accepted the gig (about six weeks).
Braised wagyu short ribs topped with roasted maitake mushrooms and served alongside pommes puree and au poivre sauce feel French, but Tien says even that dish has Asian components. The dish is subtle nod to Vietnamese black pepper steak, and Sichuan peppers swim in the sweet, cognac-spiced sauce. He’s working on sourcing a Vietnamese green peppercorn, too.

Despite earning coveted reviews, appearing on cooking competitions, and being recognized as one of the top young chefs in the country by outlets like Eater and Food & Wine, the 33-year-old chef says he’s too often fallen into the trap of trying to model himself after others.

“If I try to be like anybody else, I’ll just become a second- or third-rate version of that person,” Tien says. “I’ll never, like, truly be good. So what I need to do is I need to find out what made me confident in my food in the first place, and really focus on myself.”

Moon Rabbit (801 Wharf Street SW) opens for dinner first Saturday, October 31. The restaurant plans to eventually add options for takeout, a more casual lunch, and room service at the InterContinental Hotel.